NEWS

'Poor' Imelda wants her diamonds back

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– Imelda Marcos claims she's going broke. And she has the perfect solution: she wants her loot back.

The wife of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos is demanding that the Philippine government return P15 billion worth of jewelry – a collection which includes a Persian-style necklace with more than 100 carats of canary and pink diamonds; tiaras previously owned by European royalty; a 93-carat diamond necklace crafted by renowned Italian designer Gionmoria Buccellati. There is no conceivable way Mrs. Marcos could have paid for the jewels on the ostensible salary of her late husband Ferdinand, who was first president and then dictator of the Philippines. Yet she claims the loot is rightfully hers, and wasn't bought using plundered wealth. The jewels consisting of three collections were seized by or turned over to the Philippine government after the downfall of the Marcos regime in 1986. [See sidebar] In her letter to Presidential Commission on Good Government (PCGG) on May 25, 2009, Mrs. Marcos insisted that she remains the items' legitimate owner since the agency has yet to initiate any civil or criminal proceedings in any court for their forfeiture. Mrs. Marcos noted that the PCGG never issued any sequestration or freeze order over the jewels, as mandated by Article 18 of the 1987 Constitution. The Justice Department, however, rejected Mrs. Marcos' request, saying that the Malacañang collection is part of forfeiture proceedings pending before the Sandiganbayan, the country's anti-graft court. Justice Secretary Agnes Devanadera said there is no way that the PCGG can release the jewelry due to the pending forfeiture case. **Marcos wealth** Imelda's attempt to reclaim the jewels is only the latest episode in

a two-decade battle between the Marcoses and the government over the wealth of the late dictator's family. Shortly after she was swept to power in the 1986 EDSA revolt, former President Corazon Aquino formed the PCGG to assert the government's claims. Aside from the contested jewels, the Marcos wealth purportedly includes millions of dollars stashed away in Swiss bank accounts, several private estates, and the secret ownership of shares in private corporations of Marcos cronies. More than two decades have passed since the Marcos regime was overthrown by the People Power uprising, but the family has always insisted that their wealth was not ill-gotten. Mrs. Marcos argues that her husband was already rich even before they got married, fending off claims that she, her husband, and their friends pilfered the Philippine government's treasury. Mrs. Marcos alone is facing 10 graft charges on allegations that she held financial interests in secret foundations and private enterprises while she was a member of the Interim Batasan Pambansa from 1978 to 1984. To date, neither Imelda nor any of the accused of ill-gotten wealth during the Marcos regime have spent a minute in jail. But the government has had moderate success in recovering the Marcos wealth in a range of corporations and properties. **Mockery of justice** Critics of the Marcos administration have vowed to block the possible return of the confiscated jewelry to the former First Lady. Etta Rosales of the militant group Akbayan said returning the jewels would be a disservice to Filipinos, especially the victims of human rights abuses, torture, and enforced disappearance during martial law from 1972 to 1981.

'Imeldific'

"You have to be some kind of light, a star to give them guidelines." This was former First Lady Imelda Marcos' justification for her fabled extravagance: it was her duty to inspire Filipinos, especially the poor. Her 3,000 pairs of shoes and gem collection are only some of the lavish possessions that earned her a dictionary entry, the now infamous "Imeldific" that refers to an ostentatious lifestyle. The PCGG has classified her jewelry collections into three:. The Malacañang set This collection consists of pieces of jewelry found in her private chambers in the Palace after the Marcoses fled into exile in Hawaii. Little information is available about the Malacañang collection, except that it

is included in Civil Case No. 141. The government claims that the items are among the pieces of property, which should be forfeited in the name of the Philippine Republic. The Hawaii set This collection was seized by United States customs authorities after the Marcos family set foot in Hawaii in 1986. The US government subsequently turned over the jewelry to the Philippine government. Among the items in the set are tiaras that, according to Mrs. Marcos, were previously owned by royal families. The former First Lady said some of the jewels were bought in Russia and were intended for religious images like the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Sto. Niño.

An officer of the PCGG shows a diamond-and-south sea-pearl-studded tiara, one of the jewels seized from Imelda Marcos. - AP

PCGG director for legal affairs Jay Miguel said the collection is now conclusively owned by the government pursuant to the settlement agreement executed by and between and former PCGG chair of PCGG David Castro, confirmed by the District Court to Hawaii. * Note: The Malacañang and Hawaii sets are hidden in vaults at the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas for safekeeping. The Roumeliotes set Said to be the most expensive among the three collections, the Roumeliotes set was confiscated by Philippine customs officials from Greek national

Demetriou Roumeliotes shortly after the Marcos family fled to Hawaii. He was supposedly attempting to whisk the 60-piece gems from the Philippines and take them to Mrs. Marcos. The former first lady denied ownership of the jewels but investigations and court cases subsequently showed the 60-piece loot was hers. The set is currently with the Bureau of Customs because the jewels were seized pursuant to the tariffs and customs code, according to the PCGG. - GMANews.TV